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ABSTRACT

Although the stepfamily has become a significant family system in the United States, the amount of empirical research on stepfamily living is limited. The definitions of a stepfamily as any family in which at least one adult is a stepparent is a simple one, yet the issues and dynamics involved in stepfamilies are complex. The structures, roles, functions, and boundaries of stepfamilies are more ambiguous and complex than are those of nuclear families. Children grieve over the dissolution of their parents' marriage and go through the grieving stages of denial, anger, guilt/depression, and acceptance/resignation. Children can be at different stages in this cycle when their parents remarry and their stage can determine their ability to adjust to a remarriage. Seven critical issues which children deal with in relation to remarriage are: (1) dealing with loss; (2) divided loyalties; (3) deciding where he/she belongs; (4) membership in two households; (5) unreasonable expectations; (6) fantasies of natural parenting; and (7) guilt over causing the divorce. Much of the stepfamily literature suggests that adolescent stepchildren may experience the greatest difficulty in adjusting to a stepfamily system. Adolescents, in particular, may experience stress related to discipline, having a biological parent living elsewhere, unrealistic expectations, and divided loyalty. The rapid growth in the number of school-age children living in stepfamilies indicates the need for school counselors to initiate programs to assist stepfamilies. There are a number of ways that therapists can help stepfamilies through education and family therapy. A primary consideration for the therapist working with a stepfamily is where the family and the family members are in regard to developmental issues. (NB)

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Identification and Treatment of Stepfamily Issues for Counselors and Teachers

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Abstract

This article identifies and provides demographic information on stepfamilies in American society. The effects of divorce and subsequent remarriage on children are explored, specific problems of adolescent stepchildren are examined, school support systems are outlined, and specific therapeutic intervention techniques for use in stepfamilies are presented.

The stepfamily has emerged as a significant family system in American society. The demographic data reported by Glick and Norton (1979) suggest that there is no longer a typical American family unit. Glick (1979) further indicates that the percentage of children under 18 years of age living with their two natural parents will decline from 73 percent in 1960 to 56 percent in 1990.

Despite the increasing need for investigation of stepfamily living, along with training and education for therapists, the amount of empirical research in this area is limited. Lutz (1980) states, "As the incidence of remarriage following divorce continues to rise significantly, there is an increasing need for clinicians and social scientists to examine the unique characteristics of the remarriage family" (p. 2).

A stepfamily is any family in which at least one adult is a stepparent. While this is a simple definition, the issues and dynamics involved in stepfamilies are quite complex. Stepfamilies include those in which children live with a remarried parent and a stepparent; those in which children from a previous marriage visit with their remarried parent and stepparent; and those in which the couple is not married and children from a previous marriage either live with or visit the couple (Visher & Visher, 1979).

One-half million adults become stepparents every year and one out of every six American children under 18 is a stepchild. By 1990, stepfamilies could be the norm with their complex processes of family disruption and attempted reintegration. The redivorce rate of 44% is indicative of the stress and strain experienced by those involved in the joining of two families (McGoldrick & Carter, 1980).

While conducting research for this article, the authors have discussed at least nineteen differing terms to describe the stepfamily. They include:

TABLE I

Names Identified in Research to Describe the Stepfamily Unit

Aggregate	Compound	Metafamily	Recoupled
Amalgamated	Composite	Mixed	Remarriage
Blended	Consolidated	Multimarriage	Split
Binuclear	Joint	Multiparent	Step
Combined	Merged	Reconstituted	
		Reconstructed	

The multiplicity of names by which the stepfamily is known emphasizes its uncertain status. The most important issue, however, is that stepfamilies are different from nuclear families. The structure, roles, functions, and boundaries of stepfamilies are more ambiguous and complex. Because of the metafamily system, composed of stepfamily members plus former spouses, grandparents, stepgrandparents, aunts, uncles, and others who may have significant input into stepfamily system (Sager, Walker, Brown, Crohn, & Redstein, 1981), one researcher concluded that the stepfamily tree, in actuality, constitutes a family forest.

The Effects of Divorce and Subsequent Remarriage on Children

Children grieve just as parents do over the dissolution of the marriage of their parents. The following example of the grieving process is one that can be used for any loss--whether it is the death of a loved one, a divorce, or a seemingly insignificant loss such as a missed phone call. Look at the example of the missed phone call and how it can be described to a client in relation to grief:

> Imagine that we (client and therapist) are walking down the hall at the end of a session. You inform me that you think you hear my phone ringing. I turn and run to run and answer the phone. However, I soon realize that I have inadvertatly locked the door by closing it when I left. I agitatedly search for a key. Finally I find it, open the door and dash to the phone. As I pick up the receiver, I hear the phone on the other end hang up. Despite this, I say "Hello! Hello!,." When I realize no one is there, I hang up the phone in a huff. Then I start in....." If only I hadn't closed the door when I left the office," or "I should have known a call would come now," or "If I had carried the key in my hand I would have been prepared." By now you intervene and point out that it is only a missed phone call and surely whoever it is will call back shortly. I acknowledge you are right, and let go of fretting over it and get back to saying good-bye to you.

This is a good example to use because it clearly illustrates a quick movement through the grieving stages and is easily understood by clients. The first stage is Denial--notice that I noted that I heard the person on the other end hang up and yet I insisted on saying "Hello!" anyway.....I was denying what I heard. In the second stage, Anger, I was angry when I realized that there was no response to my hello. Stage three, Guilt/Depression - "If only I had", "I could have", or "I should have" are typical responses. Stage four, Acceptance and/or Resignation - "Oh well, there's nothing I can do to make it any different so I had better get on with what I was doing" completes the cycle.

How long it takes to complete this grieving cycle depends on the severity of the loss. In the case of the missed phone call, the cycle is over in a few minutes, but in the case of a divorce or the death of a loved one, the cycle can take years to complete or remain incomplete.

Often children are at different stages in this grieving cycle as parents remarry. The stage they are in can determine their ability to adjust to a remarriage. As parents learn about these stages, they can assist their children through them. It is important for children to receive permission to pass through these inevitable stages. Incomplete

mourning is a common problem for children of remarriages. Too often parents respond to a child's actions and reactions rather than assessing what is going on under the surface and helping a child cope with the underlying feelings.

Remarriage itself is a loss for children in that they lose the one-to-one relationship with the parent they had during the single-parent phase. Once again, children are faced with the grief cycle. The Vishers (1979) point out that at the time of remarriage, all children are stepchildren while not all parents are stepparents. They can feel exposed and out of control of what's going on in their lives, love and hate are magnified, rivalry and competition for attention increase, and insecurity and the search for identity are magnified as well.

During this phase it is critical for parents to be aware of what is operating under the surface level for children so that they can help children through their grief. Parents and counselors can prevent them from getting stuck in destructive cycles by giving them permission to grieve.

The Vishers (1979) have listed seven critical issues that children deal with in relation to remarriage. Briefly these include:

1. Dealing with Loss: It is important to keep in mind that children are in different places emotionally from their parents as mentioned above.
2. Divided Loyalties: This issue is most detrimental when children become pawns in the struggle between natural parents as they vent hostility. Children need permission to love both natural parents.
3. Where Do I Belong?: If a child is in the Denial Stage of greiving, parents need to go over and over the fact that circumstances,

indeed, have changed. Adults need to be aware of children's fears and must accept them. For the majority of children, their world is turned upside down--often there has been a change to a new home and a resulting loss of familiar faces and places. Some children must further adjust to a sudden shift in birth order and to have brothers and/or sisters for the first time in their lives.

4. Membership in Two Households: It is important to help children see that when two sets of rules prevail, both be acceptable versus right and wrong. Two households can provide positive additional role models and a wide variety of experiences.

5. Unreasonable Expectations: Part of the job as counselors is to help clients assess what are/are not realistic expectations. A blended family is not a nuclear family and trying to fit it into that model is futile. Parents can relax more easily and move into their new statuses over a period of time if they know, for example, that it takes between eighteen and twenty four months for children to accept discipline from an incoming parent figure, or that there is no such thing as instant love, or that it takes time to work through the grieving process as outlined above.

6. Fantasies of Natural Parenting: When the divorce is not dealt with, fantasies of parents reuniting are greater. It is common to have wishes and fantasies, but children must be helped to know what is fantasy and what is reality.

7. Guilt Over Causing the Divorce: Guilt breeds resentment and anger and can trigger much of the behavior adults find difficult to handle. Sometimes it is easier to believe "if only I had been different my parents would have stayed together" than to accept the inevitablility of the situation no matter what the behavior had been. Clinging to the belief of causing the divorce does impart a feeling of mastery. To give up the belief may reduce guilt, but may also result in depressive feelings. Once clients understand these issues and know what to expect, feelings of hopelessness diminish and a platform for building is established. Therapists are very important support systems for clients who are struggling with the complexities inherent in the blended family.

Adolescent Step-Children

The blending of two families is potentially stressful for all stepfamily members. Much of the stepfamily literature suggests that adolescent stepchildren may experience the greatest difficulty in adjusting to the stepfamily system (Capaldi & McRae, 1979; Rosenbaum & Rosenbaum, 1977; Walker, Rogers, & Messinger, 1977). Visher and Visher (1979) reason that, "Because adolescents have developed to the point where they have become differentiated from their parents and are cognitively mature enough to observe what is going on around them psychologically, they can figure out that their parents and stepparents are themselves feeling insecure in their new roles" (p. 195). Another aspect of adolescence that may lead to stress for adolescent stepchildren is the need to gradually break away from the family in order to experience autonomy. Stepfamily adjustment may compound this aspect of the adolescent's developmental process.

Stressful areas of stepfamily living, according to the literature, include: (1) discipline; (2) having a biological parent living elsewhere; (3) unrealistic expectations; and (4) divided loyalty. These categories are certainly not the only stressful areas, but seem to be especially stressful for adolescents.

Discipline may be stressful because the adolescent is striving for autonomy and trying to break away from home. This is developmentally normal, but can be compounded by having to deal with discipline from someone who is not their parent and/or someone that they may not like or respect--their new stepparent.

It is also difficult for adolescents to adjust to unrealistic expectations of calling a stepparent "mom" or "dad" or being expected to spend extra time with the new family unit. Adolescents have usually progressed psychologically to the point that forming a close identity with the new stepparent is, at best, a very difficult task. Hopefully, the adolescent and the new stepparent can develop an alternate type of relationship that satisfies both of them.

Adolescent stepchildren often have a biological parent living elsewhere with whom they have formed a bond that has developed over the years. There may be stress in not being able to see this parent or in the way the new parent configuration handles visitation. Also, teens may have feelings of divided loyalty in which they feel that if they like their stepparent, they are being disloyal to their natural parent with whom they do not live.

In summary, research literature supports empirical evidence that points to the fact that if teens become stepchildren during adolescence, it is more stressful for them than if they made this transition at an

earlier age.

School Support Systems

Family counseling, parenting workshops, and parent conferences are activities traditionally included in the school counselor's milieu or responsibilities. Otto and Brown (1982) state, "As the school has accepted responsibility for both social and intellectual growth, it has also expanded its horizons to include concern for the child's general welfare, recognizing that the family plays a significant role in a child's personal development" (p. 101).

The decision to provide services to parents can have a positive impact upon the child and the total family. However, similar services are usually not provided to stepparents and custodial parents living in a stepfamily unit. The rapid growth in the number of school-age children living in stepfamilies indicates the need for school counselors to initiate programs to assist stepfamily members.

While it is true that many feelings and situations experienced by nuclear family members are also experienced by stepfamily members, stepfamilies differ from nuclear families in many areas of family life. Visher and Visher (1979) suggest that the techniques employed in working with stepfamily members may be similar to those used with the nuclear family, but the goals will be different because of the complexities of stepfamily life.

Because discipline is seen as a stressful area of stepfamily living for adolescents (Strother, 1981), it is valuable for school counselors to teach parents and stepparents more effective ways to interact with adolescents in terms of rules and guidelines for the family. Counseling for parents and stepparents may also help them to understand the complexities of adolescence and the impact that discipline may have upon the teenager.

School counselors can also help the stepfamily unit by providing information and assistance regarding the adolescent stepchild's relationship with the absentee parent. Counselors can support the stepchild and parents in developing a system, agreeable to all, concerning weekends, holidays, and other times when disagreements arise over visitation. Also, the school counselor can serve as a student advocate in these situations, especially when the adolescent is feeling pressure to visit the absentee parent or being kept from visiting that same parent.

The category of social issues has important implications for school counselors. Professionals need to be aware of the possibility that some adolescents may not need an inordinate amount of support dealing with significant others in terms of becoming a stepfamily member. This is a factor for school counselors to be aware of when counseling adolescent stepchildren. Often, school personnel have a tendency to label an adolescent as a "stepchild" and decide that the student's problems revolve around that label. Strother (1981) and Lutz (1980) indicate that the adolescent stepchildren who participated in the studies they conducted were adjusting satisfactorily to society's reaction concerning stepfamilies. In fact, the social stigma attached to stepfamilies may just be a myth conceived in the minds of those adults who have had difficulty in their own adjustments to stepfamily life.

School counselors can assist parents and stepparents by helping them understand their adolescent's needs and feelings, encouraging them to make positive changes, and by pointing out unrealistic expectations for their adolescent stepchildren. It may be crucial for school counselors to teach stepfamily members, especially parents, that "time heals all wounds" is, in reality, a myth. School counselors are in an

excellent position to dispell this myth for those stepfamily members who are merely awaiting for "things to get better." Time, itself, does not make the stepfamily unit work; it is how the family members use the time that helps to blend the stepfamily unit.

A primary consideration to be confronted is where the family and family members are in regard to developmental issues. Though this is a concern in other therapy situations, developmental issues are more complex, complicated, and crucial when working with the stepfamily unit. In the stepfamily unit there is an overlay of a variety of life cycles simultaneously. There are life stages of each individual, the life cycle stage of the couple, and the life cycle stages of the stepfamily to be considered.

Though developmental life cycle stages impact each family and often are primary areas of focus in family therapy, they increase in degree of importance quite often in therapy with the stepfamily unit. The immediacy and instantaneousness of "family" in the stepfamily unit are frequently difficult to cope with by many stepfamily members. The beginning of the marital dyad usually has a period of time for adjustment prior to the entry of children and children enter the unit individually, spaced over time, this isn't true in the stepfamily unit. Additionally, one or both parents have been placed in a role not present in the beginning family, that of serving as a single-parent. To add to the complexity, the marital subsystems of the beginning families remain connected in the parental roles for their children. In stepfamilies where there have been multiple marriages prior to the formation of this unit, the channels of connectedness can become tremendously complex.

Basic cultural goals that are present in most families include helping children merge into society as independently functioning individuals and to provide stability, security and personality growth for the adults in the family. Developmental tasks and stages to be dealt with in the stepfamily unit are somewhat different from the beginning or biological family. The following tasks face the stepfamily unit immediately and must be confronted in order for individual growth to proceed:

1. Facing and grieving the losses that transpired prior to to the formation of the stepfamily unit.
2. Sorting out those important traditions from prior families and negotiating those applicable to the new family as well as establishing new traditions.
3. Forming new alliances in the new family structure as well as maintaining important alliances from the former family units.
4. Establishing functioning and productive integration into the new stepfamily unit.

As has been mentioned before, a major role for the therapist in working with all families is that of education. A part of the educative process is to normalize the process the family is experiencing as much as possible. This need is paramount in helping the stepfamily unit in confronting the developmental tasks listed above.

Experiencing loss is a part of every family's experience. Even though loss is often conceptualized as coming from an unfortunate event such as death or illness, loss can be experienced from positive events as well. While it may be a positive event for a family to move into a new home, there may be the loss of a familiar neighborhood and the friends associated with that neighborhood. Any loss such as this can provide stress to the family or to individual members of the family. When working with the stepfamily unit, it is very important to remember that all stepfamilies are formed of loss of some type whether it be

from death or divorce. Depending upon the time that has transpired between the time of death or divorce and the remarriage, each individual involved in the loss may be at a different point in the grieving process, as outlined earlier in this article. It is important for the therapist to help family members recognize that different rates and paces of grieving are normal and that no individual should be expected to progress according to another's timetable.

A loss that is very often overlooked in forming the stepfamliy unit is the loss of the single-parent family unit. While the single-parent unit also is created from loss, it is a very viable family structure. For many children the time of living in the single-parent family structure is a very special time with a special and unique relationship with one parent. The remarriage of that single parent may be perceived as a severe loss to the child or children. An additional factor that is important for the therapist to keep in the awareness of the family members is that often the children have had no voice in either the original loss (death or divorce) nor in the decision to form the stepfamily unit, therefore, they may possibly experience the losses as more severe than the adults involved. It may be much easier to get the feelings of loss out in the open in the presence of a supportive therapist than in the stepfamily's home structure. Additionally, individual stepfamily members may need the therapist's assistance in recognizing and dealing with their feelings of anger, depression, and sadness.

Each person and each family operate from certain habits. This melting of habits become family traditions and rituals. Some of these center around particular family events (birthdays, holidays, vacations, etc.) and some center on daily living and maintenance. When stepfamily members come together, there are few, if any, shared memories. Styles of daily

operation may be considerably different. The therapist can work with the stepfamily unit to assist them in creatively joining together around shared activities and new habits designed for this particular family. It is important that all family members be allowed input into this redesigning process. It is especially important that older children be included in this decision-making process since they have longer experience with their own habits as to "how families are supposed to function." If the therapist experiences resistance from any family members during this process, it is important to clarify the feelings involved and to check out how this process is possibly being defined as an additional loss.

The task of forming new alliances in the new family structure, as well as maintaining important alliances from the former family units, is an important area of focus for the therapist working with the stepfamily unit. A key point of which all family members need to be aware is that the members of the new marital dyad chose each other and that the children involved may have had little or no input into this decision. The myth of instant love, mentioned earlier, often comes into play here. Since members of this new marital dyad love each other, they quite naturally want their children to love their chosen mate. While this is a natural and expected want, the "want" is often confused with a "should." Too often all members of the new family are expected to love each other when the reality is they hardly know each other. A caveat the therapist can remind the new family of is the realization that new alliances develop slowly and a high degree of patience is important.

Another area of awareness the therapist can promote is the importance of maintaining selected alliances that existed prior to the formation

of the stepfamily unit. For children in the new family structure, a great deal of stability and assurance may rest upon the maintenance of an alliance with a friend, grandparent, other extended family members, and/or the absent parent. The entrance of a stepparent may well be experienced as a threat to these existing relationships. It is even conceivable that either or both spouses need to maintain some kind of continuing relationship, even including former in-laws, if these relationships are healthy and supportive. Under the tuteledge and guidance of the therapist, a lot of "talking it out", clarifying, and negotiation may need to take place in order that family members experience the maintenance of these prior bonds as being additive to the current family structure rather than posing a threat. There may be a need to lessen these former alliances gradually rather than cutting them off abruptly. Ideally, a number of these and similar issues would be dealt with in remarital and/or family therapy prior to the formal creation of the stepfamily unit.

While each of these tasks are being spoken to individually, it is important to keep in mind they are taking place concurrently and with a lot of overlap in dynamics as opposed to being seen as separate and distinct entities. The last task to be addressed in this article is establishing functioning and productive integration into the new stepfamily unit. Again, patience and the permission for integration to develop slowly as opposed to the expectation of instantaneousness is very important. The therapist can provide helpful information on the normalcy of the developmental process of integration and provide reminders of the need for patience while working with the feelings being experienced by various family members.

Two principle emotional tasks all parents face in raising children are critical tasks in dealing with children in the stepfamily unit: providing nurturance and setting reasonable, consistent limits. While these tasks may be difficult in any family structure, the original or biological family provides a predictable sequence of providing nurturance starting with the birth of the child and the process of limit setting that progresses with the development of the child. In many stepfamilies, the process of limit setting poses problems because a stepparent wishes more input and control over setting limits without the development of nurturance which provides the foundation upon which the limit setting is built. The way has not been paved to foster the cooperation of children with adults. As mentioned earlier, it may take two or more years for a solid enough relationship to be formed between stepparents and stepchildren to allow limit setting or discipline to be productive and effective. The family therapist can remind stepfamily members of two factors: 1.) the existing relationship between each or both parents and his/her child/children; and 2.) the relative newness and tenuousness of the couple relationship. By keeping these issues in the forefront, the process of clarifying expectations and negotiating a few important rules, as opposed to trying to control each minute movement of every family member, can make the task of stepfamily a much more manageable process. These decisions often need to be agreed upon by stepparents prior to involving the children.

Ideally, the issues that have been outlined would be dealt with as developmental processes prior to the marriage that creates the stepfamily unit. Realistically, in most instances, this is not the case. There are a number of ways, however, that therapist can assist stepfamilies.

Information can be provided through seminars designed to educate about normal developmental processes and to normalize crises faced by many families. Teaching can be a very important aspect of family therapy. It has also been found that multiple family therapy can go a long way in reducing stress by normalizing the critical issues faced in stepfamily formation and presenting differentiated ways of overcoming typical stepfamily difficulties.

If the stepfamily is to be accepted as a real and viable type of family, the same characteristics that create its challenges can also produce its rewards. Dealing with losses and transitions can equip family members to cope with the shifts and losses that occur throughout life, and knowing that interpersonal relationships take work can lead to rewarding and close personal relationships (Skeen, Covi, & Robinson, 1985). A good relationship between spouses can provide children with a realistic model for their own future adult relationships (Visher & Visher, 1982).

Working with stepfamilies presents a real challenge to professionals, stretching their own values and ideas about family living in a way that is facilitative of their work, not just with stepfamilies, but with all families. There is no doubt that the stepfamily is challenging traditional beliefs about what constitutes "healthy" family living. In it, children can benefit from intimate relationships with several parenting adults, learn and value different lifestyles, observe the benefits of relationships with several parenting adults, learn and value different life styles, observe the benefits of relationships terminating as well as continuing, enjoy relationships with non-biological parents who feel less responsible for (and therefore less guilty about) the way they turn out, and understand first hand the potential benefits of adding new members to one's family. The challenge

is to accept the stepfamily as a viable family form in this culture, and to transfer what is learned from it as an aid to understanding all kinds of families.

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